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ABSTRACT

In a study of bilingual education teachers' experiences and perceptions of bilingual education, four female trained, experienced, Spanish-English bilingual primary school teachers were interviewed in depth and observed in class. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews focused on the following: teacher background and experience; experiences with students, colleagues, administrators, and parents; changes in curriculum and policies over time; and experiences in bilingual teacher education. Narrative case studies for each teacher, maintaining her own voice, were created. Cross-case analysis of the narratives revealed similarities and differences and allowed comparison with recent literature. The report describes the study and summarizes major findings in the following areas: effects of teacher background on teaching; need for native language policy commitment and improved evaluation instruments, procedures, and policies; collegial acceptance and institutionalization of bilingual programs; teacher professional judgment and curriculum design; formal and informal teacher education opportunities; the teachers' roles with students; and the bilingual teacher as a community liaison. A 17-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Bilingual Teachers' Voices

by Nancy Lemberger, Ed.D.

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BILINGUAL EDUCATION: TEACHERS' VOICES

The Problem and the Purpose of the Study

Much of the literature on bilingual education focuses on its legal, political, and methodological aspects. What is missing from the literature are the teachers' voices. Rarely is the perspective of the practitioner included in discussions about bilingual education programs. This is unfortunate because bilingual teachers have deep insight into the true nature of this educational approach. Because bilingual education has been so politically controversial, bilingual educators have continually been challenged to prove the efficacy of the programs.

> All teachers must contend with the uncertainties arising from lack of support for their profession, but this situation is doubly difficult for bilingual teachers. Education in general is often criticized, but its critics talk of improvement, not elimination. Bilingual education on the other hand, faces opposition from a large portion of the population, who would willingly do away with it. (Ada, 1986, p. 386)

The purpose of this study is to give voice to bilingual teachers' experiences, with the intent of making the implicit explicit (Everhart, 1983). Through interviews, the researcher documented four bilingual teachers' experiences and explored their perceptions of changes in bilingual programs and policies, school and community influences, and teacher education.

Research Methods

This qualitative study falls within an area of research that regards the teacher as one who knows her profession holistically. The perspective of the study is that of the bilingual teachers

themselves and uses teachers' voices as the theoretical framework. In using the teachers' actual words, this study is an attempt to understand bilingual education "through the eyes of the insider" (Hoffman, 1981).

Four female, experienced, bilingual (Spanish/English) primary school teachers, who had taught in New York City bilingual programs from 14 to 18 years, were selected through recommendations of their principals. Two were Puerto Rican, one was Mexican, and the other was Cuban. All but the Cuban had attended English-only elementary and secondary schools in New York City. The Cuban immigrated as an adult. All four teachers completed tuition-free Title VII masters degree programs in bilingual education at local universities during the 1970s.

Interviews and classroom observations were the major sources of data. Life and oral history approaches to the interviews were chosen because they allowed for discovery of "a set of common cultural patterns both the informant and their peers have experienced" (Dobbert, 1982, p. 146). Looking at past experience from the perspective of those involved is a way of gaining knowledge of the culture. Classroom observations gave the researcher a perspective on the teacher in action and allowed an opportunity to compare present experiences with those of the past.

The audiotaped interviews lasted about five hours per teacher. The semistructured open-ended interviews focused on the teachers' background experiences; their experiences with

students, colleagues, administrators and parents; the changes in curriculum and policies; and their experiences in bilingual teacher education.

Narrative case studies were created for each teacher maintaining the teacher's voice using direct quotations from the interview transcripts. Case studies were selected because they "allow an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin, 1984, p. 14). According to Shulman (1986), case studies provide a means of describing and sharing practical knowledge. Specific cases in teaching are particularly meaningful to practitioners because, "cases are memorable, and lodge in memory as the basis for later judgments" (Shulman, 1986, p. 32).

Analysis of the narratives consisted of a cross-case comparison that revealed similarities and differences in the four teachers' experiences and compared these to related literature. Conclusions and implications were then drawn.

Major Findings

The major findings from the teachers' voices are related to the following: the effects of teachers' backgrounds on their teaching; the need for native language policy commitment and improved evaluation instruments, procedures, and policies; collegial acceptance and institutionalization of bilingual programs; teacher professional judgment and the curriculum; formal and informal teacher education opportunities; the teachers' roles with students; and the bilingual teacher as

community liaison with language minority parents.

The Effects of the Teachers' Backgrounds on Their Teaching

This study exemplifies that teachers' cultural backgrounds and educational experiences affect the ways they teach. Bilingual teaching offered the teachers a chance to address the issues that they themselves had experienced, growing up as language-minority children.

> I kind of lost a little bit of my identity, only because there was no need for it. I remember being told I couldn't take Spanish because I knew it. ... It was like I was almost two people, because I could never identify with the Hispanic side.

These bilingual teachers did not have to subject their students to the abuses they experienced. One teacher's statement keenly expresses the personal importance bilingual teaching holds for her:

> Bilingual teaching is an opportunity to help do something for my community, to give back. ... Bilingual education ... would help me personally to continue with my Spanish, ... to hold on to my Hispanic background. ... It was ... a way of maintaining my Hispanic identity and culture.

All the teachers had strong Spanish language communication skills that enabled them to communicate effectively with students and their parents. Three of the teachers' childhood second language learning experiences enabled them to empathize with their students as they learned a new language and adapted to a new culture. The fourth teacher's adult transition experience seemed to assist her in relating well to parents.

The teachers' close connections with students and their parents were enhanced by their cultural congruence with the

community. The teachers' demonstrations of "cariño," a Spanish term for caring, strengthened those connections. These case studies support the assumption that teachers from the same background as their students are well suited to deal with them. However, teachers from other backgrounds were also able to make close community connections. These teachers' stories show that cultural expression and sensitivity can be developed through caring and direct contact with the culture.

The Need for Native Language Policy Commitment

The prevailing language policies stressing rapid and early transition to English strongly influenced the teachers' priorities.

> They push us with the English even though sometimes we feel the children aren't ready for all the English that they want them to have. They say that ... they aren't showing enough success. We've got to get the scores up. You've got to spend more time in the English and with the reading. You don't want to frustrate the children or ... yourself. ... Sometimes I feel like I'm talking to the wall, it's just beyond their capabilities.

The teachers worked toward the goal of having LEP student make the transition to English language instruction and evaluation by the second grade. Early transition was often incompatible with many LEP children's language needs.

> I'm not sure how fair it is to the Spanish dominant child. ... There's a lot of nurturing that I'd like to do that I don't ... get a chance. ... I wonder if I'm providing them with enough opportunity to develop to their maximum. ... [They] get lost ... when we're having a really good group discussion. [Then I] stop to translate in the middle of it [and] I'm losing the others in the process. ... I don't want to leave any of them out. So I'm doing this fast translation. I don't know if they're getting anything out of it. That's my concern.

Because of the focus on English, the teachers often felt compelled to give less emphasis to Spanish language instruction than they considered appropriate. They wanted more time to develop and strengthen the children's native language in order to ensure a smoother transition to English.

Their stories emphasize how important it is for principals and districts to support teachers' work by adopting and implementing consistent native language policies. One dual language model discussed by one teacher appeared to provide better support for native language development:

> [With that model] ... you're guaranteed that one day is their day when they feel on top. "My language is [the one] today." And that's important. I don't feel that I have it that way [now] because there is so much translating going on all the time.

Teachers need policies that provide structure and support for native language instruction for more than two years. Cummins (1981) and Legarreta-Marcaida's (1981) work on the relationship between first language development and second language acquisition supports this. Two way developmental bilingual programs may offer needed structure so that teachers can focus on long-term native language instruction (Lindholm, 1987; Morison, 1990). Consistency of policy throughout schools and districts can give teachers a foundation for more effective teaching.

<u>The Need for Improved Evaluation Instruments, Procedures, and Policies</u>

The teachers expressed dissatisfaction with language assessment and standardized testing instruments, procedures, and policies. According to the Aspira Consent Decree of 1974, LEP

children must be given the Language Assessment Battery (LAB) to determine eligibility for placement in a bilingual program. All the teachers consistently found the content, testing procedures, and the results of the LAB test insufficient for determining placement and making other important educational decisions for students.

> Children who have not passed the LAB test ... have made tremendous progress in English. They have been placed in the Spanish dominant class. Then you have others who pass the LAB test, but they are still very Spanish dominant, and they are not strong readers yet. They are forced to be placed in the ... [more English dominant] class because they've passed the LAB test.

The administering of the test often confounded the scores. One teacher recalled her "light" interpretation of the results.

> When we first started, you could tell the results of who was going to pass by who walked in to test them. ... It depended on whether these people wanted them to be entitled or not. You could tell if the group [that passed] was going to be big or small. I would take it very lightly.

The teachers found that students scoring just above the 20th percentile on the LAB (the official exit score from the bilingual program at that time) did not have sufficient English language skills to function in English dominant classes. The teachers' experiences suggested that LAB test score cutoff point should be raised. Recently, this became a reality when the cutoff score was raised from the 20th to the 40th percentile (Schmidt, 1989). Raising the score has the potential for allowing students more time in the bilingual program.

The teachers' experiences with the LAB test suggest a need for better language assessment instruments and procedures.

However, until more accurate assessment measures are available, teacher judgment of students' language ability should be taken into consideration when making educational decisions (Canales, 1990, cited in De Avila, 1990).

In connection with the English language policies, LEP children in the second grade and above were given standardized achievement tests in English. All the teachers in the study strongly disapproved of this practice. They had to spend considerable time preparing children for these tests.

> [When children] were scoring very low, we started to teach the children how to take the test: ... following directions, eliminating the answers, ... and guessing. I see value in that, but we've become too obsessed with [it]. ... [Even so] the scores in the past couple of years have still gone down.

Logically, children who have limited fluency and literacy skills in English should not be required to take tests in that language, nor should their teachers be expected to prepare them for tests that are inappropriate to their language skills and abilities. "The effort that we put into teaching these kids ... doesn't really show in the scores." Tests that give a more accurate indication of LEP children's abilities are badly needed. Existing instruments are

> not geared to what the children know either. I believe that culture is very important and we have to expose the children to different things. ... And the tests really don't measure those things.

The teachers' voices echo a statement made by Albert Shanker about time and energy being wasted on inappropriate testing: "The present idiotic system of assessment has got to go. We need a

way of knowing, really knowing, how our students are doing" (1989, p. E7). This also reinforces the need for multiple sources of information that give a more accurate perspective on students' actual achievements (De Avila, 1990).

Policies that excused LEP students from taking the English standardized tests for two years were often ignored. These policies need to be enforced and perhaps extended beyond the minimum two years. Teachers need to have a say in deciding when their LEP students are ready to take the standardized tests in English. Instead of testing LEP students in English before they are proficient, assessment policies should be geared to measuring students' abilities in their native language. These teachers believed the excessive time and energy devoted to preparing for and taking standardized tests in English deprived their students of the extra time needed for native language development and reading.

Collegial Acceptance

The teachers' expressed their pain over not having been accepted initially by their monolingual colleagues in their schools.

> They really didn't want to have much ... to do with us. They had these old faithfuls. There was really a schism. They would just go to their rooms for lunch and wouldn't have anything to do with you. They'd barely say hello. ... It was hard because the ones that remained looked at you coldly and would say things like: "My colleague, whom I've worked in the school with for so long, had to be transferred to another school because of you.

After more than 14 years, these bilingual teachers have become integrated, accepted, and respected staff members in their

schools. No longer do they have to defend themselves against the uninformed criticism from monolingual teachers. Now they are often the ones sought out for their opinions and suggestions about teaching. In one school, one teacher and her monolingual colleagues are having "great conversations"

> about how nice it would be to really have a setting where the two languages would touch everyone. ... Some kind of specialist ... can teach Spanish to the kids in the other program and where there can be a lot of interchange among all the kids in the school. ... These talks have come out of ... our [close] relationships.

The teachers' success with children, tenure in their schools, and visibility as active and committed educators have helped them earn the regard of their monolingual co-workers and become school leaders.

The Institutionalization of Bilingual Programs

The teachers' stories showed that since bilingual programs were first implemented in the early 1970s, they have evolved to meet changing needs of the community. Fluctuations in the size of the LEP student population put the bilingual programs in jeopardy at times. Over the years, these programs and their personnel have changed considerably. One school went from eight to 30 bilingual teachers during one teacher's 18 years at her school. At another school with fewer LEP students and bilingual teachers, the bilingual program has been transformed to an enrichment model with English-speaking parents choosing to place their children in these classes. These changes show the growth and developments of bilingual programs:

Bilingual Ed. was first seen as a way we could help our own.

> Now we're starting to look at how we're going to help our own and how are we going to help others to value it. So the second concept I think is new. We didn't start out with monolingual kids.

The teachers' efforts have contributed to the success and institutionalization of their respective programs.

Teacher Professional Judgment and the Curriculum

At first because of limited initial program direction, the teachers had considerable freedom to experiment, to create their own curriculum and materials, and to participate in decision-making. However, despite the curricular freedom, they lacked teaching skill and content knowledge, and, as in one teacher's case, familiarity with the English language and the workings of American schools.

Over the years, the teachers have developed their teaching skill, knowledge of the curriculum and the American system, but at the same time the programs have become more bureaucratized and subject to the current trends of uniformity and accountability. A paradox exists: as the teachers' skills have increased, the opportunities to exercise their professional judgment has decreased. This has left the teachers feeling frustrated. At first, they did not know how to do what they wanted to, and later, bureaucracy prevented them from doing what they knew they should do.

Tightly controlling curriculum is a form of deskilling the teacher (Apple, 1986) and impedes teacher professional judgment. These tighter curricular controls present teachers with conflicts about whether to follow the curriculum or meet students' needs.

For example, the emphasis on English instruction inhibited the teachers from giving as much native language instruction as they felt children needed. The teachers' stories clearly articulate the pain of these conflicting interests. Their experiences suggest that teachers need to have more voice in curriculum and school decisions.

Formal and Informal Teacher Education Opportunities

Tuition-free Title VII masters degree programs in bilingual education provided a major foundation of the four teachers' formal bilingual teacher education. However, those programs were of varying quality and were completed more than ten years ago when research on bilingual teaching practices was limited. One teacher clearly expressed how difficult it was for her to put into practice the theories she learned in her teacher education courses:

> I felt disillusioned because ... what you studied ... wasn't a reality. ... A lot of methodology ... is great on paper but how do you do that in a classroom when the kids are all mixed up [with varying degrees of language dominance?] What do you do when out of 35 kids, 12 of them were totally English dominant, and there was no one here to take these 12 kids while you teach Spanish reading?

From the teachers' stories, it is clear that they, like teachers in general, have ongoing un-met learning needs. Formal teacher education programs alone were insufficient to provide them teachers with updated skills knowledge, and information the profession demanded. The teachers expressed a need for further training, particularly in the areas of teaching Spanish and transitional English reading, and in dealing with diverse

language needs within the self-contained classroom. Even after years in the field this teacher still has questions about instructional practices:

> The whole thing isn't settled yet. ... In terms of reading: when do you do it in both languages, and in which one do you start? ... Right now we're just living it, ... trying to find answers. In terms of language: to what extent are you native and when do you begin the second [language]? What we have been doing up until now, without any research, I feel has not been working. ... We get so bogged down with the academics that we forget the second language has to be enriched. ... How do we keep both of them alive? ... We are still at the beginning. ... The whole thing is so mixed up and so jumbled, that I don't know.

Like most teachers, these teachers learned to teach on the job. One teacher candidly described the limited help she received at her school.

> I don't really think people really knew exactly what to do with bilingual ed. ... We were basically left to swim on our own. ... There were never any meetings or training on how to go about teaching bilingual children.

Opportunities for informal learning were rarely available, though when they did occur, the teachers found them very beneficial. The teacher center at one school was a particularly effective means of creating an atmosphere for collegial sharing among bilingual and monolingual teachers.

> Any lunch time you can go there [voluntarily] for a workshop on something different. It might be to learn how to use materials, ... a method, ... or some information. ...The person who works there is very dedicated. You can go there to discuss any problem.

Like many teachers, these teachers expressed a need for more time and collegial support in the areas of program articulation, planning, and coordination.

The Teachers' Roles with Students

The teachers created an atmosphere where students felt free to approach them. Their warm smiles and nods of encouragement helped students to feel comfortable. Students shared with teachers about their lives - including the sometimes tragic details.

> The teacher must deal with tough problems like drugs, negligence, and abuse. One must work to supplement what is lacking in the home. The teacher needs to have a lot of devotion and caring. Being a teacher is not just the teaching of reading and writing. The day that I must only teach them to read and write, is the day I stop being a teacher. Teaching children means educating and loving them.

All teachers expressed joy about their students' accomplishments and disappointment when they learned about former students who had dropped out, became pregnant, or became involved in drugs. One teacher was crushed when she saw a former student who

> ... had all these gold teeth and about four or five gold chains. ... [These] are signs of ... crack dealing ... [and] wealth. ... I said, "What are you doing?" "Oh I dropped out. I'm driving this truck. I'm making so much money making deliveries." Delivering what? My heart just fell to my feet. It's not always the kids you expect. I remember him being a bright kid, [from] a good home, [and] the mother was raising him alone.

Ogbu (cited in McClaren, 1988) offers some explanation about the high price a minority student pays to succeed in school. To succeed in school the student must conform to the school and mainstream culture, which often clashes with community norms. Rather than make such a sacrifice students dropped out. The four teachers tried to be positive role models for students and to bridge the gap between the school and community. The roles they

played for students were often more than just that of a teacher. They characterized themselves as friends, second mothers, and counselors to their students.

The Bilingual Teacher as Community Liaison with Language Minority Parents

Strong parent-teacher relationships are a vital part of the bilingual teacher's job:

> A lot of my time was spent just trying to get [the parents] oriented ... and doing a lot of social work. They couldn't read anything so we had to read every welfare paper for them. ... We had to write letters for them ... or explain the letters. A lot of the work that we were doing wasn't even with the kids. ... The mothers came in and did not have anywhere to go. They'd just want to talk to you about their problems 'cause they didn't have anybody to talk to.

Because the survival needs are so great within language minority communities, the bilingual teacher is an essential community liaison. The parents are

> ... into just surviving, getting a job, being at the welfare office, and trying to get the right cards for the right things. ... Survival takes a lot of energy and time.

Three teachers established significant relationships with the parents of their students. They spent a great deal of time and caring effort providing community service, making home visits, and helping parents with their health, vocational, housing, and legal needs. The fourth teacher's connections with her students' parents were not as close because, being Mexican, she did not relate well to the predominantly Puerto Rican community. Her teaching role did not extend beyond the confines of the school and her classroom. Also at her school there were strictly enforced rules that limited parent-teacher contact.

How much community work should teachers be expected to perform in addition to their already overwhelming jobs? The three teachers responded that parent and community work were essential because it enabled them to do more for their students by helping their families survive in American society. Though teachers are rarely trained to deal with community problems (Montero-Sieburth and Perez, 1987; Viera, 1975), the three found ways to work effectively with the community.

Conclusions

Listening to teachers' voices has provided concrete examples of the changes, diversity, and complexities of politically-charged bilingual programs. The teachers' voices documented the progress of bilingual programs over the past 20 years. But their stories also articulate dilemmas and problems: dealing with content in two languages when there is not enough time or commitment to encourage the native language; preparing children for testing in English, against teachers' better judgment; and teaching in unreceptive environments, where they had to defend their priorities to both parents and colleagues. Nevertheless, these teachers made valiant efforts to improve the lives of language minority students and their parents both inside and outside the classroom.

Implications

In giving voice to bilingual teachers' experiences, this study contributes to the practical and theoretical knowledge base

on bilingual education. This study has implications for administrators, teacher educators, other teachers, and researchers. Because these bilingual teachers have perspective of the past and the present, their insights can contribute to the creation of more informed and workable programs.

The cultural and linguistic connections that the teachers made with students and their families contributed their effectiveness. The teachers' stories support the need for developing and enhancing cultural sensitivity and knowledge through direct contact.

The teachers' stories imply a need for clear policies that support bilingual instruction. Policies that encourage native language development should to be articulated and supported in schools. The teachers voice a strong need for better assessment instruments and testing procedures for LEP students. Their experiences suggest that language assessment tests and standardized English tests should be re-evaluated and redesigned in order to better meet LEP students' needs.

Increased opportunities for formal teacher education are needed so that bilingual teachers can make a better connection between theory and practice. Because Title VII teacher education programs were so new when these teachers attended them, research on effective bilingual teaching practices was limited. This may have made it more difficult for these teachers' to learn how to teach bilingually. Since those first programs, much has been learned that could help bilingual teachers. Dissemination of

recent research to bilingual teachers could greatly improve their practice. In addition, the teachers expressed a need for more staff development as well as opportunities for collegial exchanges.

The teachers' stories exemplified how important parent-teacher relationships are in bilingual settings. The valiant efforts that the bilingual teachers made to help students and their families deserve recognition. Because of their role as community liaisons, bilingual teachers may need more training and support in dealing with community needs and problems.

These teachers' voices have provided accounts of their actual experiences in bilingual classrooms and expand the knowledge base on practice. Their stories support the use of qualitative case studies to add the practitioner's perspective to the literature.

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